

## Frank Barry. *Wreckhouse*

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## REVIEWS

Frank Barry. *Wreckhouse*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2003, ISBN 1-894294-65-3

FRANK BARRY'S *Wreckhouse* is certainly one of the most important plays produced in Newfoundland in many years. The play focuses upon post-industrial, possibly post-apocalyptic, cannibalistic Newfoundlanders who no longer exploit tourists for dollars; instead, they eat them for dinner. The political and cultural bite of this piece cannot be contained by the text; as the back-cover blurb explains, "this dark comedy examines the unreality of living in a society that smilingly markets a culture suffering political, cultural and economic genocide." A combination of desperation and daring, *Wreckhouse* forces its audience to think about what is being peddled by the tourist industry, and to imagine the consequences for a province selling tickets to its own demise.

Resorting to cannibalism in literature (as in reality) is reflective of a certain desperation. Watching his countrymen starve under British oppression, Irishman Jonathan Swift wrote his inspired *A Modest Proposal* in which he offers to put an end to hunger in both nations by breeding Irish infants for consumption. A crafty criticism of British imperialism and Irish supplication, Swift's proposal inspired far-reaching changes in both England and Ireland. In depicting a barren wasteland occupied by abject and indigent Newfoundlanders whose only skill is the performance of their culture, Barry is undoubtedly trying to convince his fellow islanders that dependence on a tourist industry which celebrates our past can only result in a horrible future.

One of the predicates for change is hard-hitting criticism, and no one is safe from Barry's cutting commentary. Dr. Thomas O'Steinway — notably not from Newfoundland — unleashes a particularly harsh analysis of those Newfoundlanders who perform and prostitute their "culture":

The truth is I hated them. I hated their bodies, their accents and their folk festivals.... I did like the rum. Not Screech. Jesus Christ on the cross. The night they screeched me in. (Gasps). The cod kissing ceremony. Me all smiles. I could have submachine

gunned the whole rubber booted, sou'westered, tourist-dollar grabbing lot of them. (47-8)

It is interesting that these Newfoundlanders begin disappearing from the doctor's view. First he begins to regard these "people as things ... things without lives" (4). Then they begin to disappear little by little until the day the doctor sees "a skeleton going by on a snowmobile" (4). Though his delusions eventually get him institutionalized, the good doctor remains untroubled by these disappearing dancing bears: "Make no wonder they started to disappear on me. They weren't there in the first place. Marketing, my balls" (49). In a province where culture is performed rather than lived, can those who perform it be truly alive?

Several of the Newfoundland cannibals are particularly critical of their fellow islanders. Larky, a con man as well as a cannibal (someone has to lure the victims!), wonders if there ever was a time "[w]hen we were real" (68) and lambastes what currently passes for cultural identity as a "grimacing mask of hospitality covering a cringing clock of desperation" (70). Old Crow, the apparent leader of these folksy flesh-eaters, aims her hostility at folklore professors and the untouchable Ted Russell whose work keeps Newfoundlanders "paddy-fied ... reliv[ing] those bygone days" (76) as they listen to "some old half-dead geezer singing some forty verses of some pointless ditty about some stupid slut left alone on the shore, shore, shore" (77). Performing the past condemns the future, according to Barry. It seems as if Newfoundland culture depends not on Newfoundlanders living it, but non-Newfoundlanders appreciating it — this culture does not exist unless someone else is there to watch it. Old Crow recounts a time in Newfoundland's not-too-distant future when the Trinity Pageant will become the "Trinity Massacre":

the "Minimum Wage Re-Enactors" went mad and attacked a caravan of Winnebagos from Texas.... Starved half to death for an audience. Much like ourselves tonight. Towns went to war with each other. Carbonear fought Trinity. Ferryland against Cappahayden. Oh, the pageantry of it. By crook or by snook they were mad to have 'em. Well. The bottom went right out of her. Now we've got to the point where we got to get people down and train them to be tourists instead of training us to be we. (79)

While this play is largely a wake-up call for native Newfoundlanders whose performance of culture borders on blackface (Barry has one of his characters deliver the line "I'll fetch 'em, Miss Annie" as Jim Crow), Barry makes room to criticize the "C.F.A.s" who visit the island for "a bit of culture" (79). Most notable among these is Annie, "[j]ust back from a world wind tour of stickin' her nose up places it don't belong" (87). Staccato sentences reminiscent of the clipped narration in *The Shipping News*, and a desire to make Newfoundlanders more aware of themselves, leads me to believe that she is a subtle shot at Annie Proulx. That half of the

Wreckhousers seem infatuated with her while the others are repulsed by her parallels the love-it-or-hate-it reaction to Proulx's novel and subsequent film.

Though he does little to redeem these tourists and culture vultures, Barry is sure to place the blame on the shoulders of the smiling and servile locals. The last and most enduring image of the play is of "The Wild Child" — an abandoned Newfoundland soul — "dancing itself to death" (104) as it tries to keep up with the ever-increasing tempo of a traditional jig. The message within this image is obvious — as it is throughout the play — that Newfoundlanders are "tolerating the inevitable" (2), "sittin' here jokin' around and letting ourselves be murdered" (99). Celebrating their quirky and quaint past, Newfoundlanders are forsaking their future — fiddling and folkling their way out of existence. With any luck this play will be performed again in the future — perhaps at a festival celebrating yet another milestone in our rugged and romantic history.

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Linda Cullum. *Narratives at Work: Women, Men, Unionization, and the Fashioning of Identities*. St. John's: ISER Books, 2003, ISBN 0-91966654X

THIS IS AN AMBITIOUS and skillful qualitative investigation into a relatively obscure part of Canadian history: the mid-century work and union experiences of urban, female workers in St. John's, Newfoundland. The contribution of the book is two-fold. First, it is a rewriting of St. John's urban and industrial history that takes account of the experiences of women workers in the fish and blueberry packing industry. Second, it is a particularly well-written and detailed exemplar of effective triangulation of qualitative interviewing and data analysis with archival research. In fact, it is as a methodological treatise that I believe this work gains its greatest import. Cullum's thoughts on how to fruitfully merge qualitative data analysis with social theory, in this case, post-structuralist feminist theory, are richly detailed and insightful. In addition, Cullum's use of secondary sources as a way to cross-check and flesh out the stories told by her various informants greatly contributes to the overall plausibility and empirical richness of the story told in this work.

This empirical richness is particularly evident in the way that the author details the various structural backdrops to the work experiences of the people that narrate her account of St. John's industrial history. Of note here are the chapters outlining the social geography of St. John's, the historical role of the fish and blueberry packing industry and of the Job Brothers fish plant in particular, within both this social geography and within Newfoundland's larger economic relationship with external markets. Cullum lets her narrators describe in detail how work in the Job Brothers plant was organized, and links these descriptions with broader accounts of how